

News Release

For Release: September 10, 2004

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Po‘ouli Brought To Breeding Center in “Last Ditch” Effort to Save Species

One of the last of its species, a rare Hawaiian forest bird called the po‘ouli, has been captured by a team of biologists and transported to the Maui Bird Conservation Center in Olinda. This bird is one of three individuals who are believed to represent the last vestiges of a species first discovered only 31 years ago. The birds are being captured and moved into a captive breeding center with the hope that a captive management program will be able to save this species.

After months of battling adverse weather conditions in some of Hawaii’s densest rainforests, six members of the Maui Forest Bird Recovery team captured the bird, believed to be a female, at approximately 4:30 p.m. Thursday in the Hanawi Natural Area Reserve. “She was incredibly calm and eating within minutes of being placed in a holding cage,” said Kirsty Swinnerton, project coordinator.

The bird was successfully transported to the Maui Forest Bird Conservation Center this morning by helicopter. “We took off at 7 a.m., and the weather was already closing in,” Swinnerton said. “After skimming along the treetops for a time, we came to clear skies and took off for Olinda.”

The Maui Bird Conservation Center – like the Keauhou Bird Conservation Center on the Big Island – is operated by the Zoological Society of San Diego’s Center for Reproduction of Endangered Species.

“This bird may well represent the future of this species, and we recognize the role we must play for this program to succeed,” said Alan Lieberman, avian conservation coordinator for the Zoological Society. “We are awed by this responsibility and will do everything in our power and experience to keep this bird alive . . . hopefully until the field crew can capture a mate and we can begin the process of reproduction.”

“Saving this species from extinction is a monumental challenge, and we are one step closer thanks to strong collaboration between our agencies and the Zoological Society of San Diego, and the excellent work of our biologists that have carried out the planning and implementing this work,” said Peter Young, Chairperson of the State Department of Land and Natural Resources.

The Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project team has been attempting to capture a po‘ouli since February 2003, but most of the field trips focused on the other two individual birds. They

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succeeded in mist-netting this female on the first day of the field trip that began on September 8, the fourth trip to capture her. “We will take a few days off to regroup and to see how this bird adapts to captivity,” Swinnerton said. “Then we’ll be back in the field, trying to locate and capture the other two birds.”

The decision to bring these last three birds into a captive breeding program was made in 2003 after repeated efforts to bring these individuals together in the wild had failed. The bird which was captured today is the first one of its species to be removed from the wild.

“The protocol we followed was developed by the Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project staff during the 2002 attempt to bring a male and female together in the wild,” explained Young. “Although that effort did not result in a breeding pair, it was incredibly important for the knowledge it gave us regarding how a po‘ouli may react to captivity. Thankfully, the female captured then, as well as yesterday’s capture, seemed to take it in stride.”

“Establishing a breeding pair of po‘ouli may be the most challenging task we’ve ever attempted,” said Lieberman, “We have successfully bred several Hawaiian bird species, including the ‘alala, puaiohi, and palila, and even reintroduced them into the wild, but to start off with only three birds, all of which are at least 6 years old, just increases the difficulties.”

“Without this effort, this unique species could go the way of the dinosaur, since the last three remaining birds are found in different areas of the forest and have no chance to reproduce in the wild,” said Gina Shultz, endangered species manager for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Hawaii. “This successful capture and transfer to Olinda breathes new hope for saving the Nation’s most endangered bird.”

The stocky little bird with a black mask is part of the Hawaiian honeycreeper family, but is so unique it occupies its own genus. It is the only Hawaiian forest bird to rely heavily on native tree snails as its food. Despite extensive searches, only three birds – a male and two females – have been found in recent years, and all in separate home ranges.

The elusive po‘ouli was not even discovered until 1973, when a group of University of Hawai‘i students conducting research on the east slope of Haleakala sighted a bird they had never seen before. It was named “po`ouli,” which means black head in Hawaiian, by Mary Kawena Puku`i, a renowned authority on Hawaiian culture. Biologists say its quiet and infrequent call makes it much more difficult to find than more vocal species such as the Maui parrotbill.

The Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project is made up of a team of ornithologists supported by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the State Department of Land and Natural Resources. Guidance for the team’s work and implementation plans to save the po‘ouli from extinction are carried out by the Po‘ouli Working Group, a team of more than a dozen experts from several agencies and organizations.

For more information about DLNR and partner programs for the recovery of po‘ouli and other endangered bird species visit DLNR’s web site at www.dofaw.net/birds There is also a page for the Po‘ouli Recovery Project with lots of details at <http://www.dofaw.net/fbrp/projects.php?id=00061>

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Note to Editors: The captured po'ouli is in quarantine and **will not** be available to be photographed. Next week we will attempt to obtain both still and video footage for you, but feel free to use previously provided photos (also available from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Honolulu at 792 9530).

In addition, Kirsty Swinnerton, Maui Forest Bird Project Coordinator, is available for interviews. Please call her on Maui at 808 573 0280. For interviews with the Zoological Society of San Diego, please contact Christina Simmons at 619 231 1515.